

Connecticut's Sunday Liquor Sales Ban Gives Local Package Store Owners Some Relief

But Massachusetts' recent repeal of its 6.25 percent sales tax on alcoholic beverages, which begins on Jan. 1, 2011, may entice customers in Connecticut to cross the border.

By Perry Robbin | Email the author | December 12, 2010

Ric Cartwright has owned Village Spirit & Occasion Place in Tolland for 15 years and works six days a week. His small liquor store isn't allowed to be open on Sunday, and that is fine with him. Cartwright said he values the day off that Connecticut's blue laws provide, a common sentiment among owners of small package stores.

From a consumer's perspective, lifting the state's ban on Sunday liquor sales would allow Connecticut residents to buy beer, wine and spirits seven days a week without having to cross state lines. There are few arguments against the addition of Sunday sales from those customers who patronize package stores the other six days of the week.

But for small liquor store owners, like Cartwright, a 7-day-a-week operation would result in significant pressures. Cartwright said Sunday sales would force him to increase his operating costs to keep his store open an extra day each week. Meanwhile, supermarkets and other establishments selling beer that are open every day would benefit without any major changes in overhead.

The current state laws banning alcohol sales on Sundays stem from the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, when the federal government gave individual states the option to restrict the sale of alcohol, according to a report from the Connecticut Office of Legislative Research. The laws are colloquially referred to as "blue laws," referencing the colonial-era legislation that made Sundays a mandatory day of rest.

Rick Shah, owner of the Suffield Cordial Shoppe, wants to maintain the Sunday sales ban to ensure he gets a much-needed break each week. "It's a day off," Shah said. "You would like to have a day off. There is more to life besides just work." Raj Upadhyay, the owner of Silk City Wine and Liquors on East Center Street in Manchester, said that he supports the Sunday ban because it allows his store to keep its overhead down. Upadhyay said most customers know they won't be able to buy alcohol on Sunday, so the ban spurs a run on business Saturday nights. "People buy more on Saturday even if they're not necessarily going to want it," he said. "Because they know they have friends coming over for the game on Sunday and they don't want to run out, because they won't be able to go out and buy more."

Democratic State Rep.-Elect Elaine O'Brien, who enters office in January and represents Suffield and parts of East Granby and Windsor, expressed sympathy for small liquor stores that want to maintain the Sunday sales ban to ensure a day off. "I don't blame them," she said. She said liquor stores don't need to be open seven days a week. "There's never a liquor emergency," she said. "If I have to buy something, I'll go locally and buy it. I'll plan ahead." Cartwright said the novelty of Sunday liquor sales would initially increase purchases on that day, but the feeling would wear off and purchasing would spread out through the week. Shah is new to the business, opening his package store on Mapleton Avenue just two weeks ago. It is located only two and a half miles from Massachusetts, where alcohol is sold seven days a week, and some of Shah's nearest competitors are located in the bay state. But the option of opening on Sunday doesn't appeal to him. Shah's store is already open about 12 hours a day, and he feels he wouldn't have a choice if Connecticut rolls back its blue laws. "Just to compete, I would have to remain open," he said. "It's too much overhead, because we'd have to have somebody to run the store on Sundays and we wouldn't make that much money," Upadhyay said. "Liquor stores are family run businesses, they're not franchises. It's not worth it to us."

John Eisenbeiser, owner of River Side Liquors in Agawam, Mass., said he gets business from Connecticut customers seven days a week. His store is about 400 feet from the border between the two states, but he isn't particularly

concerned with the impact Connecticut liquor laws have on his business. Massachusetts has more liberal liquor laws than Connecticut, allowing sales from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Liquor stores in Massachusetts are only required to be closed on three holidays, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas, each year. Additionally, permits for liquor stores in Connecticut are issued at a rate of one per every 2,500 residents of a town. In Massachusetts, one is issued for every 5,000 residents for a town. Eisenbeiser said the higher permit rate waters down business in Connecticut. "I don't have to worry about somebody across the street from me selling [liquor in Massachusetts]," Eisenbeiser said. "There's only so much business out there to go around." Connecticut's liquor laws restrict not just when alcoholic beverages can be sold, but where. Shah also owns American Food Mart in East Windsor, a gas station and convenience store. While he opposes Sunday sales, he supports expanding the sale of beer to establishments besides grocery and package stores. "That would be good," he said. Shah said while he has heard discussion of changing the Sunday sales law, he has not heard much about expanding sales to different establishments. Cartwright, Shah and Eisenbeiser place an emphasis on pleasing patrons and offering a variety of products. They, like most liquor stores, offer a selection that would likely not be available at many supermarkets, even if sales were allowed on Sundays. "I'm in the customer service business, I just happen to sell alcoholic beverages," Cartwright said. Shah said he stocks the largest collection of cold beer in Suffield. "I believe in excellent customer service," he added. Cartwright said he believes liquor sales in Connecticut and out-of-state purchases by Connecticut residents come down to tax and spending issues. During a trip in 2009 to the New Hampshire, he found bottles of Captain Morgan rum were between \$4 and \$6 less expensive at the retail level in that state than the wholesale prices he pays in Connecticut.

New Hampshire keeps costs down by only selling liquor through stores operated by the state, eliminating the independent distribution and retail elements of the system used in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Eisenbeiser expressed a similar sentiment, saying taxes and revenue play an important part in liquor sales. Massachusetts' recent repeal of its 6.25 percent sales tax on alcoholic beverages, which begins on Jan. 1, 2011, may entice customers in Connecticut to cross the border, he said. If Sunday sale laws change, Connecticut liquor stores will face a decision dictated by economics. Cartwright said he would remain open on Sundays if he had the necessary support from financial institutions, suppliers and government legislation. "Give me a reason to be open seven days a week," he said. "Allow me to pay my bills." "I don't have a problem being open on Sunday, just make it worth my while," Cartwright said.